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ABSTRACT

The demand for child care services in the United States continues to grow, stretching the levels of program quality to the limit. In fact, the country is facing a crisis in child care. Affordable child care continues to be a major issue for many families. Solutions to the current crisis in child care must, in addition to insuring affordability, assure (1) the quality of programs; (2) adequate compensation for teachers; and (3) availability to all families. Many families are unable to afford the cost of child care; subsidies to these families would allow them access to quality programs. To fight the problem of high turnover rate among child care workers, substantial increases in wages and benefits are necessary. Licensing of early childhood programs is another important issue, and parents need to work with states to monitor program quality without hindering availability. An integrated approach to dealing with the day care crisis is essential; there can be no trade-offs between quality and affordability. (SKC)

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ERIC Digest

Quality or Affordability: Trade-Offs for Early Childhood Programs?

Barbara Willer

The demand for early childhood services in this country has never been greater. This unprecedented demand is stretching the levels of program quality to the limit. In fact, we are facing a crisis in child care. Many programs are unable to recruit and retain qualified staff due to inadequate wages and difficult working conditions. Affordability continues to be a major issue for many families.

Child care and early education issues are gaining increasing media attention, as evidenced by recent stories in *Newsweek, Time, USA Today, The New York Times,* and *The Wall Street Journal.* Numerous child care bills have been introduced in Congress, and state legislatures and local municipalities continue to discuss the child care issue.

Unfortunately, many of those who have "discovered" the crisis in child care focus on only one facet of the problem: the need for affordable programs. The fact is that solutions to the crisis must, in addition to insuring affordability, assure (1) the quality of programs, (2) adequate compensation for teachers, and (3) availability to all families.

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There are those who assume that assuring affordable programs is the primary concern. Some suggest that licensing provisions should be relaxed. They feel that strict standards keep potential providers from offering services and thus exacerbate problems in program availability. Those who focus strictly on affordability assume that program quality will improve as parents purchase the level of quality they desire. This reasoning is based on several faulty assumptions:

- —That families have unlimited income to spend on child care,
- —That parents fully appreciate the long-term implications of lack of quality and have the resources to act on this recognition,
- —That parents can adequately monitor programs without outside assistance,
- —That licensing standards are not important for safeguarding children in care settings.

Paying for Child Care

Most parents want to ensure that their children have good early child care, but many are unable to afford the cost. A recent survey of 600 American families revealed that nearly 40% of the respondents felt that they could not afford their current child care arrangement or the arrangement they would prefer (American Federation, 1987). States are also finding it difficult to fund adequate child care. Fewer than 10% of the 1.1 million eligible California children who are 14 or younger can be served at the state's current level of child care funding (Blank, 1987). Family incomes cannot support the current delivery system, let alone provide the resources needed to improve the quality of services. Relying on family income to stimulate improvements in program quality will serve only families which can afford to pay for a quality program. Such an approach unfairly limits participation in good programs to affluent families.

Provision of subsidies to families to allow them full access to quality programs would require a massive infusion of resources, on a sliding-scale basis, into the child care system. It is unlikely that sufficient funds can be funneled to programs through parent subsidy. Too many parents already face competing demands for their limited budgets.

A Problem of Program Quality

Across the country the quality of early childhood programs is being affected by serious problems in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. For years, staff have subsidized early childhood programs by accepting compensation far below the value of their work. Many early childhood practitioners receive income below the poverty level. A new survey by the National Committee on Pay Equity (1987) found that child care is the second most underpaid profession. Turnover rates among child care workers are among the highest for any industry. When an early childhood staff member leaves, it may take months to find a qualified person to fill the vacancy.

To fight turnover, programs must be able to offer substantial increases in wages and benefits. Even if unlimited funds were provided, quality programs would not be guaranteed. That there is little public understanding of the importance of early childhood care and the characteristics of quality programs for young children is apparent in the low status and compensation

accorded those who teach and care for young children. This general lack of understanding is exacerbated by the fact that deleterious effects of low quality programs may not be immediately apparent, but rather constitute missed opportunities with potentially negative long-term effects.

Parents Alone Cannot Monitor Program Quality

When a family eats at a fast food restaurant, the parents do not walk through the kitchen to judge its cleanliness. Public licensing and inspection processes help to ensure that consumers find acceptable quality. Licensing of early childhood programs serves the same purpose. Licensing standards set forth the public definition of acceptable program quality for children. Differences in standards from state to state reflect differences in public understanding of and support for needed provisions. Parents play an important role in monitoring the licensing process, but ultimately the state sets minimum levels of acceptability.

Does licensing hinder program availability? Licensing standards help to keep out unscrupulous or unqualified providers. More importantly, an effective licensing system helps providers in locating information and technical assistance, recruiting children, and getting insurance. Thus, an effective licensing system actually supports the provision of early childhood programs. Easing licensing provisions, or deregulating care by making registration for family day care providers voluntary, negates the public value of this service. Further, easing standards may compromise the safety of children if necessary safeguards are not required.

Addressing the Crisis

The provision of quality early childhood programs benefits all segments of society. Parents benefit from knowing their children are getting the best possible start in life. Employers benefit because parents' productivity is not impaired by unstable arrangements. Despite benefits to all, the costs of providing quality early childhood services have been borne largely by parents and the subsidies of early childhood staff. Creative approaches are needed to encourage all segments of society to take a more active role in supporting quality programs. Many such strategies are described in the NAEYC publication *The Growing Crisis in Child Care: Quality, Compensation, and Affordability in Early Childhood Programs.*

Groups and individuals can also work to ensure the passage of new federal legislation proposed by the Alliance for Better Child Care (ABC). A major portion of the funds in the ABC legislation is targeted to help families deal with the problems of affordability on a sliding scale basis. But the ABC effort also seeks to improve the total child care system by (1) improving access to quality programs, (2) strengthening state standards and their implementation, (3) improving family day care as well as child care centers, (4) supporting parental involvement, (5) advocating training programs to ensure qualified staff, (6) encouraging coordination among state and local agencies that affect young children and their families, and (7) providing additional funds to serve more children, assure quality, and improve compensation of staff. (To find out more about the Alliance for Better Child Care, contact The Children's Defense Fund, 122 C. Street NW, Washington, DC 20001.)

An integrated approach is essential to dealing with the crisis of child care. There can be no trade-offs between quality and affordability. We can make a significant investment in the future of our nation when we support the provision of high quality early childhood programs to all families who want their services.

This ERIC digest was adapted from "Quality or Affordability: Trade-Offs for Early Childhood Programs?" YOUNG CHILDREN *42 (September, 1987):41-43.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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